



Bound for Freedom: the Case of Polly Strong

Important Events Surrounding State v. Lasselle

February 25, 1777

Hyacinth Lasselle (pronounced yah-SEENT lah-SELL) is born in the Miami Indian village of Kekionga (modern-day Fort Wayne, Indiana) to Jacques Lasselle, a merchant fur trader and British Indian agent, and his wife, Marie Theresa Berthelet Savoyard.

About 1779 or 1780

Polly Strong's mother, Jenny, a fifteen-year old black slave, is seized by Native Americans and held as a prisoner. The Native Americans in turn take her to Detroit where she is sold to Isaac Williams.

1787

The Confederation Congress enacts the Northwest Ordinance. One of its provisions prohibits slavery in the Northwest Territory.

August 3, 1795

The United States signs the Treaty of Greenville with Native Americans living within the Northwest Territory. The peace treaty provides for the release of prisoners on both sides. (See Treaty of Greenville, Article 2)

Some time after August 3, 1795

Isaac Williams of Detroit sells Jenny (Polly's mother) to Antoine Lasselle, Hyacinth's uncle.

c. 1796

Polly Strong is born to Jenny. (Later baptismal records list her father as "one named Strong.")

1797

Hyacinth Lasselle begins trading at Fort Wayne, Indiana.

October 1803

Hyacinth Lasselle purchases William Prince's tavern on Second Street in Vincennes, Knox Co., Indiana.

1804

Hyacinth Lasselle moves permanently to Vincennes and becomes a prominent resident of the city.

1806

Hyacinth Lasselle purchases Polly from Joseph Baron. (*Currently, it is not known how Polly came to be in Baron's possession.*)

1812

During the War of 1812, Hyacinth Lasselle serves as an officer in the Indiana Territorial Militia and eventually is placed in command of Fort Harrison, near Terre Haute.

Before 1816

John Johnson, Judge of the General Court of the Indiana Territory, gives the opinion that the children of Jenny are slaves.

June 1816

Indiana's first constitution is written in Corydon, Indiana. Following the requirements of the Northwest Ordinance, this constitution prohibits slavery or involuntary servitude.

December 11, 1816

Indiana is admitted to the Union.

July 15-16, 1818

In reference to a freedom suit, a writ of *habeas corpus* requires that Hyacinth Lasselle present both Polly and her brother James to the Knox Circuit Court. Lasselle asks that the case be dismissed.

August 1818

Polly and her brother James assert their claims to freedom in reply to Lasselle's writ of *habeas corpus*.

April 11, 1819

Polly is baptized as “Marguerite” in St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Vincennes, Indiana.

Early May 1819

Arguing for Polly and James Freedom, Jenny petitions the court for a writ of *habeas corpus* to be issued against Lasselle for the presentation of her children in court. Witnesses are summoned. (*The outcome of this case is not contained in the available documents.*)

January 25, 1820

Joseph Huffman, a man of color, is indicted for taking Polly without Lasselle’s consent. (*This is a separate case, but obviously related to the case between Lasselle and Polly. Both occur in the Knox County circuit court.*)

January 27-28, 1820

A series of court documents reveal the ongoing struggle between Polly and Lasselle (James, Polly’s brother, is not mentioned in these documents). Documents include a second writ of *habeas corpus* for Polly; Lasselle’s response followed by Polly’s; a \$500 bond assuring that Lasselle brings Polly to court; and the summoning of witnesses on Polly’s behalf.

January 28, 1820

Lasselle makes a statement to the court claiming that Joseph Huffman detained Polly for nineteen days without his permission. He seeks damages amounting to \$1 for each day she was gone. Huffman counters. The sheriff holds him until bail is set and paid.

February 4, 1820

Additional witnesses are summoned on behalf of Polly.

February 12, 1820

Lasselle asks for a continuance and witnesses are summoned on his behalf.

April 10, 1820

Witnesses are summoned for both sides.

[Date unknown]

Knox County Circuit Court Judge Jonathan Doty rules in Lasselle's favor: Polly must remain Lasselle's property.

July 22, 1820

The Indiana Supreme Court reverses the judgment of the Knox Circuit Court. Polly Strong is declared a free woman.

March 2, 1822

Joseph Huffman brings a case against Polly Strong. The Knox County Sheriff takes Polly into custody. *(It appears that Huffman is attempting to collect money lent Polly during her trial.)*

March 8, 1822

Polly's bail is set and paid.

March 27, 1822

Witnesses are summoned on behalf of Joseph Huffman. All are persons of color.

April 3, 1822

Polly denies the charges.

[Date unknown]

The jury finds in favor of Joseph Huffman and awards him \$35 in damages.

June 17, 1825

In a letter to Hyacinth Lasselle, James Lasselle (apparently Polly's brother) states that he will deliver a bureau belonging to Polly when requested. *(This is the last known direct reference to Polly. However, the 1830 U.S. Federal Census indicates a woman of Polly's age is in residence with Lasselle.)*

Spring 1833

Hyacinth Lasselle and his family leave Vincennes for Logansport, Indiana, in Cass County.

January 23, 1843

Hyacinth Lasselle dies at the age of 65 at his home near Logansport, Indiana.